EDWARD GIBBON AND EMPIRE

EDITED BY

ROSAMOND MCKITTERICK

University of Cambridge

AND

ROLAND QUINAULT

University of North London

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Introduction

Rosamond McKitterick and Roland Quinault

Why do we, or why should we continue to read Gibbon's *History of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire*? The many who still read Gibbon – a number surely set to rise further with the publication of David Womersley's new edition of *Decline and fall* – may do so for reasons which have little to do with Gibbon's subject or his historical method, but more for his superb wit and ruminative literary style and for his reputation as one of the finest of the historians produced by the European Enlightenment. Consequently, the new edition of *Decline and fall* was at first reviewed by modern rather than by classical or medieval historians.[1] Thus Jose Harris has observed that Gibbon's ability to speak to us now is 'not a consequence of his scholarship (which was often faulty) nor the authority of his historical judgment (which was often grotesquely biassed) but in the style of his writing, the high drama and human interest of his subject matter, and in the fact that many of the philosophical dilemmas which confront and engage him seem eerily familiar in the present day'. Gibbon remains 'part of the mental furniture of any reasonably literate person . . . his reputation has been given a series of shots in the arm by the rise of literary theory, the fashion for Europeanism, and the revival of academic interest in the history of civic humanist thought'.[2]

[1] One exception is the late antique historian Christopher Kelly in the *Pembroke College, Cambridge Society's Annual Gazette* 69 (1995), pp. 32–42.

[2] Jose Harris, 'Our sarcastic scholar', (review of David Womersley's edition of *Decline and fall*) in *The Times Higher Education Supplement* 30 June 1995. Contemporary admiration for Gibbon's achievement is most apparent amongst those historians who have attempted to write history on a Gibbonian scale, notably Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, *Millenium* (London, 1995). Compare Paul Johnson, 'Namier's icecream', and Anthony Pagden, 'The barbarian spirit: is the day of Empires coming to an end?', *The Times Literary Supplement* 29 September 1995 and Anthony Pagden, *Lords of all the world: ideologies of empire in Spain, Britain and France c. 1500–1800* (London, 1995).

These recent reviewers of *Decline and fall*, however, have not mentioned the coincidental renaissance of studies of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages in Europe and North America over the last thirty years – partly inspired by the work of scholars like Peter Brown, John Matthews and Michael Wallace-Hadrill. Yet this scholarship, together with the sheer importance and scope of Gibbon's subject, means that we cannot and should not ignore the details of Gibbon's history and regard it merely as a good read spiced with a dash of philosophy.[3] On the contrary, Gibbon established the terms of reference for the debate about the transformation of the Roman world and the emergence of medieval Europe. Although his vision of 'decline and fall' has now to be drastically revised in the light of the present generations of research, and although the validity of the concepts of 'barbarian' and 'Roman' are now seriously called into question, the debate is by no means resolved.

To read Gibbon in the late twentieth century, therefore, is also to engage with his subject matter. To understand him properly it is necessary to have knowledge of his historiographical and philosophical context.[4] Gibbon's *Decline and fall* needs to be considered, in other words, as a forceful interpretation of the period and not just for what it reveals of eighteenth-century intellectual attitudes. Style, contemporary ideas and the historical narrative cannot be separated. This volume of essays is structured, therefore, as a kind of dialogue examining particular portions of Gibbon's narrative, especially in his interpretations of empire and the intellectual context in which he formulated them, against a background of the eighteenth- and twentieth-century knowledge of late antiquity and the Middle Ages. Gibbon's ideas of empire, explored in so many different contexts in his work,[5] his understanding of monarchy and balance of power, his sources and

[3] As it has been alleged that Churchill did, see Quinault below, pp. 317 and 331.

[4] This was the theme of the 1976 Gibbon celebrations, published by G. Bowersock *et al.* (eds.), *Edward Gibbon and the decline and fall of the Roman Empire*, *Daedalus. Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 105 (1976). See also K. Hammer and J. Voss (eds.), *Historische Forschung im 18. Jahrhundert*, Pariser Historische Studien 13 (Paris, 1988).

[5] On the later Roman, Byzantine, Carolingian, Seljuk, Ottoman and Mongol empires, see Matthews, Cameron, Shepard, Howard-Johnston, McKitterick and Bryer below, but Gibbon also encompasses the medieval German, Norman, Latin crusading empires, and the European empires of his own day.

working methods, the structure of the work, his attitude towards the 'barbarians', the contrasting treatments of the eastern and western Empires in *Decline and fall*, his appreciation of past civilizations and their material remains and his visual sense, his audience, and reactions – contemporary and modern – to his text, are considered in the light of modern research on eighteenth-century intellectual history on the one hand and on late antiquity, Byzantium and the Middle Ages on the other.

Such consideration is at both a general and a specific level, for we wish to stress the importance of understanding the concept of empire in a precise sense and within a specific context. While John Robertson explains Gibbon's choice of topic and elucidates his essential hostility towards the Roman Empire and Jeremy Black highlights the seam of classical analogy in its eighteenth-century context, such attitudes are also examined by Averil Cameron in the light of Gibbon's own specific focus on the Byzantine Emperor Justinian, by Ian Wood in relation to Merovingian Frankish rulers and by Tom Brown in considering Gibbon's interpretation of the reign of Theodoric the Ostrogoth in Italy. Similarly, Averil Cameron and Peter Ghosh are able to provide complementary interpretations, from two different perspectives, of the significance of the structure, methods and conceptual framework of *Decline and fall*, as well as the function of the 'General observations on the fall of the Roman Empire in the west' which concluded volume III of *Decline and fall*. An examination of Gibbon's sources and working methods throws into relief some of Gibbon's genius as well as his shortcomings, as is clear from the expositions by John Matthews, Jonathan Shepard, James Howard-Johnston, Anthony Bryer and Rosamond McKitterick.

The question of Gibbon's audience and the degree to which he was addressing a public familiar with at least the main events and heroes of his story, is a crucial one. David Womersley investigates the question of Gibbon's contemporary audience by means of a meticulous analysis of Gibbon's reaction to criticisms of his notorious chapters 15 and 16. He indicates how Gibbon underestimated the strength of religious sentiment in his time as well as the appeal of his subject even in those quarters apparently most resistant to historical scholarship. Rosamond McKitterick tackles the question of the wider cultural understanding of late antiquity, Byzantium and early medieval Europe in the eighteenth century

and the relevance and interest of particular segments of the past to eighteenth-century political thinking in Europe as a whole. The hermeneutic question of how Gibbon might have been read is also explored by Roland Quinault in relation to someone in a position to act on what he thought he had learnt from Gibbon, namely, Winston Churchill, who was wont to relate the Roman and British Empires in his own mind in consequence.

Many chapters in this book assess Gibbon as a scholar and fellow historian in relation to his sources, for it is by such analysis that the inclinations in his thinking can be made clear. John Matthews and Averil Cameron examine Gibbon's grasp of the techniques of source criticism in his use of the Augustan history and Procopius respectively. The consequences of ignoring whole categories of evidence are exposed by James Howard-Johnston in his study of Gibbon's notoriously cavalier treatment of the Byzantine middle period. Conversely, Anthony Bryer and Jonathan Shepard demonstrate how Gibbon was able to make innovative use of other primary material both in relation to the Mongols and Ottomans and in the chapters on the Slavs, Bulgars, Hungarians and Rus and the story of their retrospective conversion to Christianity. Gibbon's attitudes to some of the historiographical material he read and the degree to which he treated past histories as idiosyncratic interpretations of a comparable purpose to his own are elucidated by Ian Wood and Tom Brown, with reference to the Franks in Gaul and the Goths and Lombards in Italy. Although Gibbon concentrated on political and military events, he fully appreciated that empires are not merely narrow political and military constructs. He allowed room for technological prowess and economic vitality as essential foundations for military success. Gibbon's visual sense and his imagination, touched on by many of the papers in this volume, led him to interpret aspects of the art and architecture he had observed as potent symbols of imperial greatness in ways that have many contemporary resonances.

Gibbon criticism hitherto has largely focussed on the three volumes published in 1776. We have deliberately chosen to concentrate on volumes IV–VI, first published in 1788; that is, we have been most concerned with those chapters which comprise a series of portraits of nations external to Byzantium, as well as Byzantium itself. Our studies of these chapters and their implications offer new perspectives on Gibbon's preoccupations with the 'decline

and fall' of Rome as a whole. We have followed Gibbon's own chronological course in the first portion of the book. We then take up the themes, referred to above, defined in the chapters by the Roman, Byzantine and medieval historians, and examine them in their eighteenth-century context as well. As John Robertson observes below, 'decline' is not synonymous with 'fall'. Gibbon's problem was as much one of the Empire's survival as its decay. Indeed, the contradictions of his work are a direct consequence of his charting the former as if it were the latter. This is particularly evident in his treatment of the German successor states as the destroyers of Roman ways, a view that cannot now be sustained. Although Gibbon acknowledged that many of his barbarian leaders laid the basis for a new political system, he failed to acknowledge how much there was that was Roman in that system. As is clear from the papers by Matthews, Wood, Shepard, Howard-Johnston and Bryer in particular, Gibbon's subtle intelligence led him many times to chart the development of particular institutions and states that implicitly, and sometimes explicitly (notably the famous chapter on Roman law)[6] contradicted his title.

The nub of the matter is contained in Gibbon's fourth volume: the 'extinction of the Western Empire AD 476'[7] in Gibbon's eyes was an immediate consequence of the action of the barbarian *magister militum* Odoacer in abolishing the 'useless and expensive office' of emperor. He describes the 'decay of the Roman spirit' in Odoacer's kingdom which, notwithstanding the prudence and success of Odoacer, 'exhibited the sad prospect of misery and desolation'.[8]

For many, with Gibbon, the deposition of the unfortunate Romulus Augustulus, the last Roman emperor in the west, who 'was made the instrument of his own disgrace',[9] can be seen as marking the point from which central political control over the western provinces of the Roman Empire officially ceased to be effective. Yet this is emphatically not the same as the 'fall of the Roman Empire', nor even a crucial phase in its 'decline'. Efficient propagandists in

[6] See McKitterick, below, p. 170.

[7] *Decline and fall*, ed. Bury, IV, p. 50. Some would prefer the demise of Julius Nepos in Dalmatia in 480 but see Gibbon's note 132, pp. 51–2 on the case for 479 and another set of Bury's 'implacable square brackets' insisting on 476.

[8] *Ibid.*, pp. 50 and 53.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 50.

Justinian's eastern empire developed the notion that 476 was a decisive break.[10] To the population of Italy, however, the general Odoacer's military *coup d'état* no doubt seemed to herald merely another vacancy on the imperial throne, such as they had experienced many times over during the preceding century, while political and army factions manoeuvred for control. To at least one articulate Gallo-Roman aristocrat in fifth-century Provence, the triumph of Odoacer marked a definitive end to Roman political control in this region;[11] to Byzantine propagandists, moreover, it was a convenient justification for Justinian's wars of reconquest. Yet both were thinking in terms of specific political leadership.

Rome meant more than this. Indeed, it is one remarkable indication of how much more it meant that so many recent studies have been devoted to an examination of the process of transformation of the Roman world and the degree to which the western European successor states were heirs to Rome in terms of their political and administrative institutions, law, culture, religion and social organization.[12] In discussing the fragmentation of political leadership, the gradual changes in the character, status and objectives of the ruling personnel, the resurfacing of political and social identities at a local level and the transformation of the political configurations of the west, it is unfortunate that notions of 'decline and fall', first propagated by patristic theologians, adapted by Renaissance humanists and Protestant reformation scholars,

[10] See Walter Goffart, 'The theme of "The barbarian invasions" in later antique and modern historiography' in E. Chrysos and A. Schwarz (eds.), *Das Reich und die Barbaren*, Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung 29 (Vienna, 1989), pp. 87–107, and reprinted in Walter Goffart, *Rome's fall and after* (London, 1989), pp. 111–32, and general reflections in 'An empire unmade: Rome AD 300–600' in Goffart, *Rome's fall and after*, pp. 33–44; Brian Croke, 'AD 476: the manufacturing of a turning point', *Chiron* 13 (1983), pp. 81–119.

[11] Jill Harries, *Sidonius Apollinaris and the fall of Rome* (Oxford, 1995).

[12] See, for example, C. R. Whittaker, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire. A social and economic study* (Baltimore and London, 1994); Rosamond McKitterick (ed.), *Carolingian culture: emulation and innovation* (Cambridge, 1994); Ian Wood, *The Merovingian kingdoms, 450–751* (London, 1993); Chris Wickham, *Early medieval Italy* (London, 1983) and *Land and power. Studies in Italian and European social history, 400–1200*; Roger Collins, *Early medieval Spain* (2nd edn, London, 1995); Patrick Amory, *Ethnography and community in Ostrogothic Italy, AD 489–554*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought (Cambridge, 1996); G. Ausenda (ed.), *After Empire. Towards an ethnology of Europe's barbarians* (Woodbridge, 1995) and the volumes in preparation by members of the European Science Foundation's project: *The transformation of the Roman world: new approaches to the emergence of early medieval Europe*.

were taken up by Gibbon and his contemporaries.[13] They established not only disputes over alternative 'reasons' for the 'fall' of the Roman Empire, but also dichotomies between Roman and barbarian, civilized and primitive, insiders and outsiders, foreign invasions (the barbarians) versus internal weakness (corruption, social injustices, depopulation, economic decline).[14] As a consequence, preconceptions of 'barbarians' persist which are themselves, as Patrick Amory has established, inherited from the literary and artistic depictions of Graeco-Latin ethnography.[15] Such preconceptions have an observable influence on those who read Gibbon. We are only now learning, for example, to appreciate that the world, especially that of Italy and the Balkans between the fourth and seventh centuries, was one in which our distinctions between Roman and Goth or Roman and barbarian are simply irrelevant.[16] Even critical readings are still offered within the conceptual framework of the 'decline and fall' of an empire that Gibbon created with such magisterial literary artifice.

Yet a crucial distinction must be made between Gibbon's treatment of the various empires which absorbed his attention. Recent scholarship of Byzantium, for instance, has tended to corroborate and draw strength from Gibbon and to rehabilitate many of his negative judgments on the culture and polity of the empire. It has thus diverged widely from the best of the western medievalists' work. Although Gibbon stressed the weakness of the Byzantine state in the 'middle period', he also pointed out that before Heraclius, 'Give centuries of the decline and fall of the empire have already elapsed'.[17] His criticisms of the Byzantine emperors of this period are no more pungent than his comments on many of their Roman predecessors, from Commodus to Honorius. It is true, moreover, that Gibbon's skimpy account in chapter 48 of the emperors from Heraclius to the Latin conquest was a product of design, rather than disdain. It was not his 'intention to expatiate

[13] See Jean-Pierre Devroey, 'Les invasions barbares. Sentiments de défaite et mort des empires' in M. Vaïsse (ed.), *La Défaite. Études offertes à Annie Rey-Goldzeigner* (Rheims, 1994), pp. 9–18.

[14] Compare Peter Heather, 'The Huns and the end of the Roman Empire in western Europe', *EHR* 110 (1995), pp. 4–41 and *Goths and Romans 332–489* (Oxford, 1991) and John Drinkwater and Hugh Elton (eds.), *Fifth-century Gaul: a crisis of identity* (Cambridge, 1992).

[15] Amory, *Ethnography and community*.

[16] Notably in the light of Amory, *Ethnography and community*.

[17] *Decline and fall*, ed. Bury, v, p. 169.

with the same minuteness on the whole series of the Byzantine history. From the seventh to the eleventh centuries the obscure interval will be supplied by a concise narrative of such facts as may still appear either interesting or important.'[18] Nevertheless, the judgment of Byzantium as an obscure period, his selection of 'such facts as may appear either interesting or important' and what Howard-Johnston has referred to as his selective use of the sources, and his willingness to resort to short cuts if they were available (a willingness equally in evidence in Gibbon's pages on the western medieval empires after 800) are what has earned Gibbon criticism by subsequent Byzantinists. Despite his unjustifiable disparagement of the middle Byzantine period, cogently contested by Howard-Johnston below,[19] Gibbon, as Bryer and Shepard make clear, could be in many ways a lucid and quite sure-footed evaluator of his sources. It was, after all, Gibbon's interest in Byzantine and Muslim history, aroused on a visit to Mr Hoare's library at Stourhead in 1751 when he was still a boy,[20] which encouraged him to continue his *History* beyond the fall of the western Empire.

In publishing these papers we have been very conscious of our predecessors in the Royal Historical Society a century ago who held the first centenary celebration of Gibbon's achievement. Comparisons are inevitable. Victorian interest in Gibbon appears to have been stimulated not only by his skill as a story teller and a stylist, but also by his perceived views on topical issues such as imperial policy and religious uniformity. Gibbon had modestly expressed the hope 'that a hundred years hence I may still continue to be abused'.[21] For much of the century after his death in 1794,

[18] *Ibid.*, I, p. viii.

[19] Steven Runciman, 'Gibbon and Byzantium' in Bowersock, *Edward Gibbon*, pp. 103–9; and compare Freeman's complaint in 1888 that Gibbon had made the later Byzantine Empire appear ridiculous, W. R. W. Stephens, *The life and letters of Edward A. Freeman* (2 vols., London, 1895), vol. II, p. 380: Freeman to Goldwin Smith, 25 April 1888 with Frederic Harrison's Rede Lecture in Cambridge in 1900. Harrison claimed that the great achievement of modern Byzantinists was in removing the incubus of Gibbon's disdain: Martha S. Vogeler, *Frederic Harrison. The vocations of a positivist* (Oxford, 1984), p. 35. Even J. B. Bury believed that Gibbon had displayed a contemptuous attitude to the mid-Byzantine Empire.

[20] There he read the Continuation of Echard's *Roman History* when he was only fourteen: see *Autobiography*, p. 32.

[21] Walter Bagehot, *Literary studies*, ed. R. H. Hutton (2 vols., London, 1884), vol. II, p. 53.

Decline and fall remained a controversial text.[22] Gibbon's rude remarks about the dismal education he received at Magdalen were grist to the mill of the mid-Victorian university reformers, while his criticisms of the early church were welcomed by secularists, libertarians and Positivists. Thomas Carlyle, no less, lost his faith after reading *Decline and fall*. Indeed, a century after the first publication of *Decline and fall*, Gibbon was admired by many intellectuals who were much more critical of the *status quo* than he had ever been. Whereas Gibbon had been a conservative Whig who had supported Lord North's attempt to suppress American Independence and opposed the French Revolution, many of his Victorian admirers were radical liberals. A group of them, originally from Oxford, were responsible for celebrating the centenary of Gibbon's death in 1894 with a 'Gibbon commemoration'. The meeting and the volume which was its outcome were sponsored by the Royal Historical Society, under the presidency of M. E. Grant Duff, at the suggestion of Frederic Harrison, who also gave the main commemorative address. The Royal Historical Society established a special committee to organize the commemoration which included some of the principal luminaries of historical scholarship in Europe – Edward Acton, Frederick Maitland, Theodor Mommsen and Ernest Lavisse. The Prime Minister Lord Rosebery (a great admirer of Gibbon) and the President of Magdalen College were also on the Committee.

The *Commemoration* contained a sprinkling of conservatives, including George Prothero (later a president of the Royal Historical Society), several senior members of the Church of England and Henry Holroyd, third earl of Sheffield. The last named is best known as a patron of cricket, but he was also the grandson of Gibbon's friend and patron, Lord Sheffield, who had inherited most of Gibbon's papers and effects. His seat at Sheffield Park in Sussex was close to the country home of Frederic Harrison, who persuaded the third Lord Sheffield to become president of the Gibbon centenary committee and to loan his Gibboniana to the British Museum's Centenary Exhibition.[23] The exhibition generated public interest in the Gibbon papers which the earl subsequently

[22] On its publishing history see Norton's *Bibliography*; compare Brown and Quinault below.

[23] Royal Historical Society, *Proceedings of the Gibbon Commemoration 1794–1894* (London, 1985). See also R. A. Humphreys, *The Royal Historical Society 1868–1968* (London, 1969), pp. 24–5.

sold to the British Museum in 1895. Lord Sheffield wrote the preface to Richard Prothero's edition of *The private letters of Edward Gibbon*, published in 1896 by John Murray, who himself edited and published *The autobiographies of Edward Gibbon* in 1898. Thus both directly and indirectly the 1894 commemoration stimulated the scholarly study of Gibbon.

Frederic Harrison's role appears to have been crucial. He and two other members of the Gibbon commemoration committee – J. H. Bridges and E. S. Beesley – were Positivists who had been educated at Wadham College, Oxford, where they had been influenced by the Positivist tutor, Richard Congreve. Gibbon's sceptical attitude towards the early Christian church ensured him a place in the Positivist Calendar and *Decline and fall* a place in the Positivist library. Harrison did not, however, adopt a totally uncritical attitude towards Gibbon. He declared in his commemorative address:

> We come to study Gibbon – not to praise him . . .
>
> His monumental work still stands alone, in the colossal range of its proportions, and in the artistic symmetry of its execution. It has its blemishes, its limitations, we venture to add its misconceptions; it is not always sound in his philosophy; it is sometimes ungenerous and cynical. But withal it is beyond question the greatest monument of historical research united to imaginative art, of any age in any language.[24]

Who would endorse this today? It is for readers of Gibbon and of this volume to decide. Certainly when we gathered for the two hundredth anniversary meeting, again under the auspices of the Royal Historical Society, Gibbon's phrases at the end of chapter 33 seemed especially apt:

> We imperceptibly advance from youth to age without observing the gradual, but incessant, change of human affairs; and even in our larger experience of history, the imagination is accustomed, by a perpetual series of causes and effects, to unite the most distant revolutions. But if the interval between two memorable eras could be instantly annihilated; if it were possible, after a momentary slumber of two hundred years, to display the *new* world to the eyes of a spectator who still retained a lively and recent impression of the *old* his surprise and his reflections would furnish the pleasing subject of a philosophical romance.[25]

[24] *Gibbon Commemoration*, p. 21.

[25] *Decline and fall*, ed. Bury, III, pp. 414–15 and compare John Matthews below, p. 13.

Not only does this passage emphasize the possible connections between the 'most distant revolutions'; it also serves to underline the inevitable differences in perspective on the part of an historian, whether in the eighteenth century, in the nineteenth or at the end of the twentieth, when assessing the Roman world and its transformation. It remains for our successors to make their own contributions in due course.